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Unitarian Horizons

October 15, 1938

PRESSING THE BALL

IT is a golfer's term, but I heard it used not long ago in connection with preaching. Not being a golfer myself, I had to ask just what it meant, and the highly intelligent Unitarian layman with whom I was having lunch smiled as he explained what he had in mind. "It means that you are trying to push the ball instead of hitting it, which in turn means that you are try-

ing too hard. You have to learn how to relax a bit if you want to get anywhere in golf. And that goes for preaching too. Most preachers I have heard lately—and I happen to have heard quite a number—preach altogether too much in italics. It isn't effective. Why don't you suggest that they stop pressing the ball?"

WORTH THINKING OVER

IT always amuses me to see the naïve faith of a layman in the power of a mere denominational official to exercise any influence over the preaching of three or four hundred Unitarian ministers. I told my friend that this is *not* one of the ways in which we are "like a mighty army." He smiled again, and said, "Well, it won't do you any harm to think it over." And it hasn't.

I have thought of it a good many times as I have been singing the last verse of the hymn before the sermon; and while it obviously isn't a magic formula to transform ordinary preaching into what is popularly called "great" preaching, I honestly think it has helped me. That is why I venture to pass on the advice—not only to my brethren in the pulpits of our churches, but to the laymen who sit in the pews and pass judgment, often not too thoughtfully, on the sermons they hear.

Why does a preacher make the mistake of trying too hard? Why does he indulge in an excessive use of italics? What urges him to press the ball? Plainly, the very thing without which he couldn't be a preacher at all—namely, his deep and sincere desire to convince his hearers. He wishes to persuade people of the importance of the things he is saying. He very much wants to make them share his own strong and moving faith. He honestly believes he has at least a bit of the burning and shining truth, and that if he can somehow communicate that truth to his congregation it will make a real difference—perhaps a vitally decisive difference—in their lives. That desire is the root of all true preaching, of course; but it is also the cause of the shouting that wearies a congregation, the monotony of continual emphasis, the strain of unrelieved italics, the ineffectiveness of pressing the ball.

THE CRITICAL MOMENT

LISTENING to other men preach, and watching myself with sharply focused attention, I have come to the conclusion that the critical moment is the opening sentence of the sermon, not the words of the opening sentence, but its tone and tempo. An experienced listener ought to be able to tell, on the basis of that sen-

tence, whether the preacher knows what he is about, whether he has himself in real control, and his sermon so carefully planned that he isn't worried about it. Sometimes, to be sure, a bad start can be overcome, and the self-control which is conspicuously absent as the preacher begins his sermon can be acquired along the way; but it isn't safe to count on that. Nine times out of ten, an opening sentence that is blundering or over-emphatic or charged with emotional tension will set the pitch for a whole sermon of the same sort.

THE WRONG NOTE

THIS reminds me of a comment which Mrs. Fiske made, a good many years ago, on the trouble which young actors get into when they have missed the strenuous discipline of a long term of service in a good stock company. "You see him going blithely ahead, striking, with more and more confidence, the wrong note." That's exactly what happens to a preacher who hasn't discovered the importance of not pressing the ball. His opening sentence strikes the wrong note, and he keeps on, with lamentably increasing confidence, striking that same note until it becomes piercingly strident and totally ineffective. He forgets the value of variety, the importance of using more than one tool, the extraordinary power of

quiet surprise, and the persuasive emphasis of a touch of humor. He is in peril of becoming a pulpit-pounder, and of being obliged to resort to any device to produce a climax. Unless he is a genius, in which case no rules apply anyhow, he will wear his congregation out and send them home with nerves on edge and tempers strained to the breaking point.

THE VALUE OF A TEXT

HERE is the real reason, it seems to me, why the traditional custom of "taking a text" is worth preserving. If a preacher is aware of his own danger of striking the wrong note at the beginning of his sermon, he can do nothing better than form the habit of choosing a text of the right sort and letting its announcement put him into full control of himself and his preaching. The more deeply his own heart is filled with the burden of his prophesy, the more will he benefit by beginning his sermon with the quiet formula, "The text this morning is taken from the fortieth chapter of the Book of Isaiah." And as he hears the words of the preacher of long ago, uttered now by his own lips, he will be reminded of the long, long story of human effort to use words to awaken the souls of men and renew their strength. "And the crooked shall be made

straight, and the rough places plain, And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." A moment's pause, as the beauty and power of the familiar phrases echo in the secret places of his own soul—and *then* he is ready to preach, not a sermon about dead theologies or battles long ago, but a sermon that will reveal to his hearers the present meaning of human idealism and the present requirements laid upon heart and conscience. The moment of inner quiet before the sermon itself begins will keep the preacher quietly in command until he has done.

HOW LONG TO PREACH?

UNTIL he has done! But how long should a sermon be? As I go about among our churches I hear every possible answer to that question, and I am further away from any dogmatic answer to it in my own mind than ever. It all depends upon the preacher, of course. John Dietrich can preach for sixty minutes, and nobody wants him to stop. John Doe preaches twenty minutes, and the man in the back pew looks at his watch and thinks it must have run down! Is there anything to be said beyond this?

Yes, I think there are two things worth saying and thinking about. They are both matters of personal opinion, but they are the fruit of personal

experience—my own, and that of a good many laymen.

The first is that almost all sermons would be improved by being cut down by five or ten minutes. Let the man who usually preaches thirty minutes force himself to stay within twenty-five minutes for a period of two months, and my guess is that both he and his congregation will find his sermons better. It means more careful preparation. It means more ruthless pruning. It means a good deal more time in the study. But I believe it will pay—any and all of us!

The second is that the length of a sermon depends upon its theme, and as the sensible minister preaches on a wide variety of subjects during a year the length of his sermons will vary accordingly. It seems to me a mistake for a minister to let himself get into the habit of always preaching the same number of minutes, not merely because he will then pad certain sermons and pare down others, but also because it is good for his people to be surprised from time to time. Here is another place where variety is desirable. The kind of people who come to our churches will quickly respond to a preacher's skillful adaptation of the length of his sermons to the nature of their theme; and if, once in a while, church lets out earlier than usual, they will probably not complain!

F. M. E.

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